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ABSTRACT

A study examined the writing experiences of three college students during their freshman and sophomore years to determine how students in a classroom setting determine the writing requirements of that discipline and for that teacher, and how they go about producing their writing assignments. The study used ethnographic observation and interviews, and analysis of composing protocols and student writing. The protocols were "situated" in that the researcher had observed the class for which the student was composing the paper, and what had taken place before and after the protocol draft. This knowledge was an asset as the researcher classified and counted one student's conscious concerns in the protocol/interview transcripts. The writing for the student's two courses did not appear to the researcher to be different, but the interviews and protocol data revealed that the student's chief writing concerns were different for each class; because the subject areas differed and were unfamiliar, the student did not realize that he had written papers in the required summary format before. In one instance the protocol findings contradicted the ethnographic data: the student felt he no longer needed to concentrate on getting a thesis statement and three subpoints, but on the subsequent paper he was not able to find his own essay structure. Analysis of successive drafts indicated how the composing aloud protocols served as the basis for the student's writing development. The situated composing-aloud protocols were a valuable tool for helping the researcher understand the student's writing experiences across disciplines and across time.(HTH)

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Situated Protocols:

Studying A College Student's Writing in Classroom Contexts

In my research I ask questions about the nature of writing processes in classrooms. How does the writing process work in those contexts? My questions are, more specifically, how do students go into a classroom setting and determine what the writing requirements are in that discipline and for that teacher and how do they do about producing it?

In order to answer these questions I have followed three Loyola College students through their freshman and sophomore years examining their writing experiences in one lass per semester starting with their Freshman Composition class two years ago--taught by my colleague--through their poetry, history, biology, computer, and statistics classes. I focused my attention first on the ways these students determine what constitues appropriate writing in each discipline and second on the strategies they use to produce it. In the homlier and proably familiar terms of one of my informants whom I call Dave: "The whole thing is," he said, "You've gotta figure out what the teacher wants and give it to him if you're gonna get the grade."

Successful students are those who can enter a classroom, which often presents them with a brand new speech situation, and determine

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what constitutes appropriate texts in this new territory. What content, structures, language, ways of thinking, types of evidence are required in this discipline and by this teacher? They can then produce such a text. Students who cannot do this for whatever reason--cultural, intellectual, motivational--are those who fail, deemed incompetent communicators in that particular setting.

As I've watched these students in one classroom writing situation after another, I've more and more come to see them, as they make the liberals arts journey from one discipline to another in their early undergraduate years, as Strangers in Strange Lands. I'm sorry that the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein beat me to that title for his novel. But actually Heinlein's Stranger is in A strange land. Mine seem to me to be Strangers in One Strange Land after Another.

My focus then is on school writing as a communicative act that is, like speaking, heavily dependent upon its context. Both writers and speakers, if they're to communicate successfully, must correctly assess what their readers or hearers know and value, are capable of understanding, how much they are willing to read or hear, and what constitues appropriate matter and means of presentation in a particular situation.

These are what James Britton calls the rules of the game. As students go from one classroom to another they must play a wide range of games, the rules for which, Britton points out, include many conventions and presuppositions that are not explicitly articulated. How students determine these rules, some stated explicitly, many more never articulated, and how they play the game is what I'm investigating

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with my three students.

Let me explain briefly the three methods of data collection that I've used in order to get as full apicture as possible of these students' writing experiences.

The first is ethnographic observation and interviews of the three students and of their teachers throughout each semester where I observe them and ask them in one way or another to tell me the story of writing in that setting. Early on I decided to interview the three students together rather than one at a time, a decision that has proven most useful. They often talk to and question each other, comparing and contrasting experiences, during our four one-hour long, taped interviews each semester. The three of them together have produced more than I believe I ever would have gotten from one-on-one sessions with them.

The second window through which I observe these students' writing experiences is the composing-aloud protocol which, of course, must be done with one informant at a time. Late in the semester, when he's had all the time he will have to "figure out what the teacher wants", I tape-record each student for 30 minutes, composing aloud the first draft of his final paper for the class. I follow this protocol with a 30 minute interview where he tells me more about the composing process he's just gone through. Here I see the student "at work" producing the writing that he understands to be required in this situation. In the transcript of the protocol and interview I count what I call the writer's conscious concerns--what he pays attention to while writing. The protocol data supports, refines, gives another view

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into the writing situation that the students and teacher have been talking about all semester. And, conversely, what they've been talkirg about and what I've observed informs my analysis of the protocol data.

The third method I use to help me get a fuller picture of these students' writing in each course involves actually looking at the papers they write using a text analysis method based on the model of conversation proposed by language philsopher H.P. Grice. Conversation, Grice says, is a cooperative endeavor. So, I maintain, is writing. My method of text analysis looks at the interaction of writer and reader, just as Grice looks at the interaction of speaker and hearer, and asks how successfully they have cooperated.

These, then, are my three methods of data collection: ethnogrpahic observations and interviews, composing-aloud protocols, and text analysis: Three lenses on these students' writing experiences. Now I have collected data on all three students for four semesters. Although they don't know it, I have concentrated on one of them, Dave, a biology/pre-med major whose writing I studied in Freshman Composition two years ago and in his sophomore courses last year, Introduction to Poetry in the fall and Cell Biology in the spring. Dave is a typical Loyola student educated in a large Catholic high school in Baltimore, a pre-med, though difficulties with chemistry last year have made him doubt that he'll get into med school, so he's considering other careers involving biology, perhaps in the health care field.

Now I'd like to tell you in more detail how Dave's composing aloud protocols helped me get quite a full picture of what he

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experienced as he wrote for Freshman Composition, Sophomore Poetry, and Cell Biology in three consecutive semesters.

I tape recorded Dave's protocols as he composed at a desk in my office during the last two or three weeks of each semester. He followed my directions to say aloud whatever he was thinking during the 30-minute time period; and the protocol session was followed, as I said, by a 30-minute interview. As Dave composed, I sat in a position where I could observe and take notes on his behavior. Composing aloud was never easy for Dave, who characterizes himself as a shy person, but as the semesters progressed, he became more comfortable and did produce in each of the protocol sessions a useful first draft for his final paper in each course.

Now I call these protocols "situated protocols". Why?

First because Dave was composing for a course that I had observed and had discussed all semester with both him and his teacher. Put differently, I knew the territory in which Dave's communication effort was set. The second way in which Dave's 30-minute protocol draft was situated was in the longer composing process required to actually complete the task. Because I followed Dave across time, I could examine what preceded and what followed the composed-aloud draft. I could thus set the protocol draft in the extended composing process.

How did this situated quality actually affect the protocols and what I did with them?

Let's return to the first sense in which the protocols were situated, that is in the classroom context. Because of my ethnographic observations and my interviews, I came to Dave's protocol transcripts

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knowing a good deal about the situation for which he was composing: I knew how he conceived his audience, how he defined the task, and what functions he believed the writing in that class accomplished for him. I also knew what the teacher had actually told students, both explicitly and tacitly, about writing in their classroom.

And that knowledge was an asset as I classified and counted Dave's conscious concerns in the protocol/interview transcripts. My classifications of his conscious concerns emerged from what I saw in the protocol data, and what I saw in the transcripts was informed by my understanding of the classroom context for writing. As I analyzed the transcripts, I drew on the work of Flower & Hayes, Perl, Bridwell, Pianko, and Berkenkotter, all the time working to answer my central question: What are Dave's central conscious concerns, what is he paying attention to, as he composes for this particular class?

And the protocol counts of Dave's conscious concerns as he composed refined, explained, and crosschecked the ethnographic data, at times corroborating it, at times contradicting it. Let me illustrate. First I'll show you how the protocol data corroborated, refined, and explained the ethnographic data.

In both Dave's sophomore Poetry and Cell Biology courses he wrote three short papers. They were critical essays on poems in Poetry and reviews of journal articles in Biology. These journal articles reported experiments which the students were to summarize and then relate to what they were doing in class. The writing for the two courses did not seem to me, on the surface, to be very different. Further the tasks and the type of reading required for them, the poems

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and the journal articles, were about equally unfamiliar to Dave.

Yet in our conversations he described the writing in the two courses as being totally different from each other, and both, he said, were totally different than anything he'd ever done before. And indeed the ethnographic and protocol data do reveal Dave's chief writing concerns in each class to be very different.

Dave's third paper for Poetry was a critical essay on a poem called "Marriage" by contemporary poet Gregory Corso. The protocols show that Dave's first concern as he composed aloud the first draft of that paper was to get the right interpretation of the poem, "the true meaning" as he phrased it, and then, second, to argue that interpretation using not his own but the poet's words. His third concern was to get it all into a coherent text using the proper mechanical forms for quoting poetry. He told me that the poem's meaning "was there, but not there, not just what it says on the surface." And, as Dave wrote, he assumed the teacher knew the poem's "true meaning" much as if the teacher had answer to the riddle that Dave was trying to solve.

The protocol thus showed that Dave was concentrating as he composed on what were for him were the new writing demands in this situation, the new "rules of the game", new "ways of speaking", in this territory. Though he had written discursive essays before in Freshman Composition, it was no wonder that writing for Poetry seemed to Dave totally unlike anything he'd ever done before.

And he also said that the writing in Biology was totally new for him. In Biology, like Poetry, Dave's chief concern while composing

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his reviews was also with the reading, the journal article. But here, he said, "the meaning was all out on the table". His protocol revealed that his first concern while writing was to understand the definitions of scientific terms and concepts. His second concern was to summarize them correctly while following as he wrote the same five-part scientific structure in which the experiment was reported. This was a requirement the teacher had explicitly stated.

Again, it was apparent in the protocols that Dave was concentrating on the new rules of use, the new ways of speaking in this setting. We can thus understand why the writing for Biology also seemed to Dave to be totally unlike anything he'd ever done before. It took one of the other boys' and my prodding to make him see that he had indeed written summaries before, lots of them.

The protocols thus corroborated and explained the ethnographic data. But occasionally the protocol findings contradicted the ethnographic data. These places were particularly interesting and suggested areas for further inquiry. Let me give you an example of how Dave's Poetry protocol contradicted, in a most useful way, what he had been saying about his writing for that class all semester.

As he wrote the first two of his three papers for Poetry, Dave told me that he no longer needed to concentrate much on getting a thesis and three subpoints for his critical essay. This essay structure, he said, just came naturally now because he'd mastered that organizational form in Freshman Composition the semester before.

What actually happened, however, was that Dave never got his own essay structure. Rather he worked down the poem explicating it

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from beginning to end.

The protocol data not only shows this happening, but also suggests why it happened, why Dave's essay took the form of a summary of the poem with some interpretation along the way. Dave, a newcomer to this territory and its ways of speaking, was so concerned with the new rules of use in Poetry getting an acceptable interpretation and properly quoting the poem, things the teacher had emphasized in class, that he was unable to leave those to concentrate on constructing his own argument. And the argument's structure never just came by itself as Dave believed it did--or maybe hoped it would. It probably won't surprise you that Dave made a C on that paper.

Such discontinuities between the ethnographic and protocol data, between what Dave said he did as he wrote and what the protocol showed that he actually did, suggested areas for further inquiry and speculation, here, for example, about the first steps Dave took as he learned the new ways of speaking in unfamiliar academic territories. As he wrote for Poetry Dave worked down the poem, tied to the concrete, we might say. As he composed, he appeared to be attached to the Norton Anthology by his left forefinger which tenaciously held his place as he progressed down the numbers he'd marked in the margin of the poem.

This domination by the concrete often characterizes our first attempts to use language in unfamiliar academic speech communities. One wonders if Dave's success in Poetry would have been enhanced if he had been asked first to write out a summary of the poem. He could then have worked from that summary as he structured his own interpretive essay.

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So then, my understanding and my uses of Dave's protocols were situated, first, in what I knew of the classroom contexts for which Dave was writing. Second, they were situated in what I knew of Dave's entire writing process for a particular assignment, what preceded and what followed the brief 30-minute composing-aloud session.

Dave came to each session prepared to begin drafting. Before the Poetry protocol session, for example, he had spent eight hours reading, making notes on, and discussing the poem. He brought with him a page of notes and the well-marked poem. He was, as I've said, very tied to that poem as he wrote, pausing to consult it frequently.

And for his Biology protocol session the following semester, Dave had spent three to four hours preparing, reading the journal article, underlining it, taking notes, and looking up scientific terms he knew he would use as he wrote. He brought these and a list of the five sections of the scientific inquiry structure which his Biology teacher had given the class. Again Dave was very much tied to the article as he summarized it, pausing frequently to consult it, at times putting his own paper on top of the lower part of the article so that his own emerging text was physically closer to what he was summarizing at that moment.

And Dave got A's in Biology. This was because the writing in Biology was supposed to be a summary that then moved to some analysis, the rather simple connecting of the summarized experiment to what was going on in class.

Thus Dave's protocol draft was situated in the sense that I knew something of what Dave had done before the session.

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I also knew how the protocol draft related to what came after it because Dave gave me copies of subsequent drafts and described some of what he did after our session together. In Poetry, for example, Dave wrote two further drafts of his essay on the Gregory Corso poem after the protocol session. As I examined those, I could see that the work he had done while composing aloud had served as the basis for those drafts. Further I could examine how Dave had been able to move a bit beyond his first-draft preoccupation with the new writing demands in Poetry to consider some more general audience needs for clarification and definition, to move, that is, from reader-based to writer-based prose to use Linda Flower's terms.

So, then, Dave's composed-aloud draft was situated in the longer composing process that extended over time as well as situated in the classroom context that I had established ethnographically.

In conclusion, these situated composing-aloud protocols were a valuable tool for helping me better understand this student writer's experiences as he wrote across disciplines and across time. They provided information about what Dave was centrally concerned with as he attempted to communicate appropriately in each new territory. They showed how he understood and and how he coped with the writing demands in particular classrooms. Put in Dave's own terms, the protocols showed how he went about giving his teachers what he'd figured out they wanted. In sum, I used the protocol information about what Dave was paying attention to as he wrote in accordance with my conception of what writing is. Writing, like speaking, I believe, must be seen as a social, context-dependent activity.

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